

US environmental groups file suit to block new coal mining on public lands

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Surrounded by miners, President Donald Trump signs an order on Tuesday he said would end the "war of coal" by rolling back Obama-era environmental protections

US environmental groups and a Native American tribe have filed a lawsuit to block the Trump administration's plans to resume leasing of federal lands for coal mining.

President Donald Trump's move this week to overturn a year-old moratorium on new [coal](#) mining leases "was unlawful because it doesn't satisfy basic principles of reasoned decision making," said Jenny Harbine, an attorney leading the legal challenge for Earthjustice, a non-profit law group.

In his announcement Tuesday, Trump declared an "end to the war on coal," reversing a series of "job killing" environmental initiatives by former president Barack Obama, including the Clean Power Plan, which aimed to phase out the use of coal power plants and ban new coal leases.

Trump had "waved the wand in an attempt to revive a dying [coal industry](#)," Harbine said.

The Obama administration in January 2016 imposed a moratorium on new coal mining leases on federal lands, most of which are located in the Powder River Basin of Montana and Wyoming, primarily surface mines.

Although coal mined on federal land accounts for more than 40 percent of total US production, the rules governing the leases have been in place since 1979. The Obama administration had sought to review the leases to take the environmental impact and benefits to taxpayers into consideration.

In the lawsuit, filed Wednesday in a US court in Montana, Earthjustice is joined by the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, the Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife and other local and national environmental groups.

Pending lease applications put on hold when the Obama moratorium took effect involve nearly two billion tonnes of coal and tens of thousands of acres (hectares), Harbine told AFP.

While she agreed the Trump administration has the prerogative to

change the policies of its predecessors, "what he can't do is make those decisions based on whim and politics alone," she said.

"You need to have rational basis for decision making," she added.

"There is a long line of precedent overturning government decisions not based on facts and science."

The suit charges that overturning the block on new leases violates US law because it "opened the door to new coal leasing and its attendant consequences without first performing an environmental review evaluating the program's significant environmental, health, and economic impacts."

Northern Cheyenne President Jace Killsback said the tribe would bear the brunt of resumed coal leasing, which will "impact our pristine air and water quality, (and) will adversely affect our sacred cultural properties and traditional spiritual practices."

However, mining advocates applauded the reversal of Obama-era environmental rules.

The coal leasing program is "highly profitable to taxpayers," the National Mining Association said.

"The moratorium on federal coal leasing was entirely without merit and rested on politically contrived reasoning," the association's chief Hal Quinn said in a statement.

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